

Congressman Baird Leads House Fight to Correct VA Shortfall -Baird Leads Impassioned Charge for Vets with Emergency Supplemental Bill- (June 30, 2005)

Washington, D.C. - Congressman Brian Baird tonight led the fight on the House floor to correct the Veterans Administration (VA) health care budget shortfall that was belatedly acknowledged by the Administration last week. Congressman Baird fought for \$1.5 billion in VA funding, an amount that would have fully and immediately rectified the health care budget shortfall for this year. House Republicans called the shortfall "unfortunate" and voted for less money than is needed to fully meet veterans' needs.

Congressman Baird predicted the VA budget shortfall in February of this year and at that time urged Congress and the Administration to add an additional \$1.3 billion to fund veterans' health care services.

"The fact that the House is standing here today, debating a fix to a problem that never should have happened in the first place is disgraceful," said Congressman Baird. "We would not be having this debate today if earlier this year the Republican Leadership had not thwarted our repeated attempts to fully fund our veterans. When the time comes to equip our soldiers, to armor their Humvees, and to care for them when they return home, the Republicans have been AWOL."

During debate on the House floor, Congressman Brian Baird spoke about meeting with a young Iraq veteran who, despite nearly losing his leg in the war, was denied VA health care services. Over the past two years, Congressman Baird and other House Democrats have repeatedly fought to increase funding for veterans' health care. The Republican Majority has supported increases in VA budgets, but they have not kept pace with inflation and the increasing needs of returning soldiers. That failure has led to the present shortfall and cuts in veterans' benefits and services.

"It is appalling the Republican Leadership claims there is not enough money in the budget to help men and women who have served this country with honor, yet they can somehow find trillions of dollars in tax cuts to give away to the wealthiest Americans," said Congressman Baird. "Cheating our veterans like this is shameful, disgraceful, and unacceptable."

In the last week alone, House Republicans have three times blocked consideration of amendments offered by Democrats to add the needed funds for VA health care to various spending bills. Republicans argued tonight they were only willing to add the amount requested by VA officials, the same officials who informed Congress on Thursday that they used faulty, outdated financial models to make the VA's original spending requests and had significantly misjudged the costs of veterans' health care.

"I have talked with countless veterans who have been wrongly denied VA health care services, and with VA health care professionals who do not have basic resources they need. Every penny of this funding is critical," said Congressman Baird. "I would rather err on the side of giving our vets more money and the best quality of care, than on shortchanging them after they have risked life and limb for their country."

Last Friday, the Washington Post reported that the Bush Administration acknowledged it is short \$1 billion for covering current needs at the VA this year. In response, the Senate promised to pass a \$1.5 billion supplemental tomorrow to cover the health care shortfall if the House vowed to do the same today. If House Republicans had voted for the \$1.5 billion tonight, the supplemental would have gone to the President for his signature before the holiday recess. Instead, House Republicans voted to offer vets just \$975 million, ensuring further legislative delays and more holdups for veterans trying to access VA services.

"Without full funding, our veterans will continue to stand in line, waiting for the services they rightfully deserve. What type of message does this send our returning soldiers? We value your bravery on the battlefield, but once you return home, you're on your own?" asked Congressman Baird.

Congressman Baird has made veterans issues a top priority of his congressional tenure. He has led the fight to keep local VA hospitals open, end the Concurrent Receipt penalty on disabled vets, give surviving spouses the benefits they deserve, and help veterans access the mental and physical health care services they are entitled to. Earlier this week, Congressman Baird joined a number of his House colleagues in reading the names of over 1,900 United States military casualties from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan into the Congressional Record, including the name of Regina Clark, the first Washington woman to give her life in the war.

Before serving in Congress, Congressman Baird worked as a clinical psychologist in veterans' hospitals and outpatient clinics, where he helped veterans recover from both the physical scars and the emotional wounds of combat. Congresswoman Louise Slaughter (D-NY), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, tonight commended Congressman Baird's leadership on VA funding.

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